

**Notice of Scoping**  
**Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah**  
**Utah Prairie Dog Research Activities Environmental Assessment**  
**October 2004**

*Dear Friend of Bryce Canyon National Park:*

The National Park Service (NPS) is preparing an Environmental Assessment (EA) in support of a Utah Prairie Dog Research Activities Plan. This EA will focus on research at a few Utah prairie dog colonies found in Bryce Canyon National Park in order to evaluate the costs and benefits of proposed research activities to the Utah prairie dog. The NPS is soliciting comments from the public to help identify issues and develop alternative Utah prairie dog research approaches that will be evaluated in the EA.

You are invited to provide your comments and become part of this planning effort. For your convenience, a comment form is attached to this scoping notice.

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**Why does Bryce Canyon need to plan and manage Utah prairie dog research?**

One purpose of Utah prairie dog research at Bryce Canyon National Park is to learn about the ecology and behavior of this federally listed threatened species so that the population of the park can be protected and conserved for the enjoyment of present and future generations. The Bryce Canyon General Management Plan (1987) identified retaining natural resources and processes as a primary park management goal. Research is a tool used to study both animal and vegetation populations in order to maintain these resources and natural processes.

The Utah prairie dog, *Cynomys parvidens*, is the westernmost species of the genus *Cynomys*. The species' range, which is limited to the southwestern quarter of Utah, is the most restricted of all prairie dog species in the United States. Prior to control programs initiated in the 1920s, the total species distribution was estimated to be 95,000 animals. By the 1960s, Utah prairie dog species distribution was greatly reduced due to disease, poisoning, drought, development, and human-related habitat alterations. Studies indicated that the Utah prairie dog had declined or been eliminated from major portions of its historical range. By 1972, it was estimated that there were only 3,300 Utah prairie dogs remaining in 37 separate colonies across the state. It appeared that the Utah prairie dog would be extinct by the year 2000.

The Utah prairie dog was listed as an endangered species on June 4, 1973, pursuant to the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Due to general increase in population numbers in the early 1980s, its status was reclassified to threatened in 1984. The Utah prairie dog was reestablished in Bryce Canyon National Park in 1974. Additional prairie dogs were occasionally transplanted into the park from other locations in its remaining range until 1987. Since then, their numbers have averaged around 134 adult animals in the 13 colonies that are monitored by NPS personnel in Bryce Canyon and on adjacent federal lands as part of the recovery plan for the Utah prairie dog.

Of the 13 colonies monitored by Bryce Canyon National Park personnel, 6 were considered active as of July 2004. The largest colony in the park is located at the "Mixing Circle" area. This colony has been studied by a visiting researcher since 1995. In July 2004, it was reported that 130 adult prairie dogs and 230 juvenile prairie dogs inhabited the Mixing Circle area. Overall, in Bryce Canyon National Park and adjoining federal lands, there were approximately 269 adult and 402 juvenile Utah prairie dogs as of July 2004.

An EA needs to be developed to fully assess how activities of a proposed research project may affect Utah prairie dogs in two colonies within the park: the Mixing Circle colony and the Mixing Circle Junction colony. The research, the goal of which is to

gather data on the behavioral ecology of the Utah prairie dog, involves the annual trapping of each animal in the colony. Animals are then marked with obvious, individualized markings, and biological data is collected. Animals are often recaptured several times each research season. Although the proposed research has been permitted in the past, there has never been an assessment of the beneficial and/or adverse impacts the research may have on the recovery of the Utah prairie dog and on park management of this threatened species. For instance, there may be changes in predation rates on prairie dogs, or habituation to humans and associated activities in the area of the Mixing Circle as a result of repeated handling and visible markings. On the other hand, the research may be able to provide valuable insight into the behavior of the prairie dogs that could not be gathered without the proposed handling techniques. This EA will review the proposed research and weigh its costs and benefits.

#### **Have preliminary issues and alternatives been identified?**

The NPS has identified preliminary issues related to Utah prairie dog proposed research activities that will be analyzed through the EA process. The NPS has not yet identified alternatives. Issues and/or alternatives identified through public scoping will be added to the following and addressed in the EA.

The EA will identify and analyze:

- methods used to capture and handle the

animals being studied;

- methods used to visibly mark prairie dogs;
- research topics that aid in the recovery of the species and meet park management needs; and
- strategies to ensure protection of park resources and visitor experience.

The goal is to develop a plan that is consistent with the guiding principles of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service policy, and the NPS Organic Act.

#### **What's next?**

After the scoping comments have been received and reviewed, the park will begin developing alternatives and incorporate these into the EA. The EA is expected to be available for public review this winter.

If you wish to remain on the mailing list and receive future information about this Plan/EA, please check the box on the comment form, print your name and mailing address, and return to the address listed above.

Thank you for your interest in Bryce Canyon National Park and your participation in the development of the Utah Prairie Dog Research Activities EA. If you have questions, please contact Kristin Legg, Chief of Resource Management and Research, Bryce Canyon National Park, (435) 834-4900.

**Scoping Comment Form  
Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah  
Utah Prairie Dog Research Activities Environmental Assessment**

Please respond to the following questions and return this form by *December 3, 2004*. You may attach additional pages if needed. Also, please include your name and mailing address in the space provided below. Thank you again for your interest in Bryce Canyon National Park.

Please be aware that names and addresses of respondents may be released if requested under the Freedom of Information Act. Our practice is to make comments, including names and home addresses of respondents, available for public review during regular business hours. Individual respondents may request that we withhold their home address from the record, which we will honor to the extent allowable by law. There also may be circumstances in which we would withhold from the record a respondent's identity, as allowable by law. If you wish us to withhold your name and/or address, you must state this prominently at the beginning of your written comments. We will make all submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, available for public inspection in their entirety.

What issues related to the proposed research would you like to see addressed? \_\_\_\_\_

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Do you have additional information, concerns, or other comments about the proposal?

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Please check this box if you would like to remain on the mailing list to receive additional information concerning this proposal.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Street/Box #: \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Please return your comments by December 3, 2004 to:  
Bryce Canyon National Park  
Utah Prairie Dog Research Activities EA  
P.O. Box 170001  
Bryce Canyon, UT 84717

Fold along lines and tape closed

**Utah Prairie Dog  
Research Activities  
Bryce Canyon National Park**



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